Progress of the Negro-1934

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Nashville Negroes Have Made Great Progress

Educational Institutions, Publishing Houses and Business Enterprises—Lawyers, Preachers And Doctors—J. C. Napier a Venerated Leader

By M. B. MORTON

It has often been remarked by thoughtful people that the finest Negro population in this country, or any other country for that matter, is found in Nashville. This is no doubt due in some measure to the Negro educational facilities found here and to the fact that the average Nashville Negro inherits many of the qualities of his ancestors, who were reared and trained by the best families in Tennessee.

There is a lawless element, just as there is among other races, but it constitutes a small minority. Nashville has numbered among her Negro citizens, physicians, preachers, lawyers, and business men of note, and the average Nashville Negro is courteous, industrious and a useful member of the community.

Forty years ago Nashville's Negro population was exceeded in number by only a few cities in the country. Now, however, due largely to emigration to the North, Nashville ranks twenty-first in point of Negro population.

The census of 1930 showed Nashville's white population to be 111,125, Negro, 42,836. By way of comparison: Atlanta's population was: white, 180,000; Negro, 90,000; Birmingham had 99,077 Negro population; Houston, 63,337; Jacksonville, 48,196; Louisville, 47,354; Memphis, 96,550; New Orleans, 129,632; Norfolk, 43,942; Richmond, 52,988; St. Louis, 93,580.

New York had the heaviest Negro population, 327,706; Chicago, 233,903; Philadelphia, 219,599; Washington, 132,086; Pittsburgh, 54,983. It will thus be seen that the heaviest urban populations have shifted from the South to the North.

Georgia had the largest state Negro population, 1,071,125; Mississippi, 1,009,718; Alabama, 944,835; Texas, 854,964. Tennessee had 477,646 Negro and 2,138,619 white population.

Mississippi is the only state with more Negroes than whites, the figures being, respectively, 1,009,718 and 996,756 by the 1930 census.

In the United States there were 11,891,043 Negroes and 122,775,046 whites in 1930.

In the nation at large, the shift of Negroes from the South to Northern cities has given them more political strength. In Tennessee, with the whites outnumbering the Negroes about 4 to 1, the latter do not cut much figure in state politics, and for this reason there is less friction here between the races than in many other states. This is also true of the City of Nashville where the ratio of population is nearly 3 to 1.

Nine and eight-tenths per cent of the Negro population of Nashville, or only 3,555 individuals, over ten years of age are illiterate. One and one-tenth per cent of the whites are illiterate. Under all the circumstances this will no doubt be considered a remarkably good showing for the colored population.

Twenty-nine and one-tenth per cent of the Negro population owned their homes compared with 42.2 per cent of the white population who owned homes, again a good showing. In other words, over one-fourth of the Negro population of Nashville owns their homes.

NEGRO INSTITUTIONS

The Colored Y. M. C. A. Building, formerly the Duncan Hotel, is the center of Negro industrial life in Nashville. Besides being the home of the Y. M. C. A., it houses many thriving business enterprises.

Among the Negro educational institutions of note are Fisk University, the Agricultural and Industrial State Teachers' College, Meharry Medical College. Those institutions have done and are still doing a great work. In the years passed Central Tennessee College, afterwards Walden University, filled an important place in the education of Negro boys and girls, but it has been discontinued.

W. J. Hale is a premier educator, and is president of the Agricultural and Industrial State Teachers' College.

Negro business men conduct a bank, a number of publishing houses, drug stores, groceries, furniture stores, barber shops, etc., in Nashville, and it is encouraging to note that practically all of them have weathered the storm of the depression in fine shape, and some new firms have entered business in the meantime.

The publishing houses are notable and flourishing institutions, doing business on a large scale with hundreds of employes. Among the larger ones are the following:

National Baptist Publishing Board, Locust Street and Second Avenue, North, Henry Allen Boyd, secretary and treasurer.

A. M. E. Sunday School Board, Lee and Eighth Avenues, Ira T. Bryant, secretary-treasurer.

Sunday School Board, National Baptist Convention, Inc., Fourth Avenue and Cedar Street, A. M. Townsend, secretary.

Baptist Young People's Union, 409 Gay Street, E. W. D. Isaac, secretary.

DOCTORS AND LAWYERS

Nashville has produced her share and more of Negro doctors and lawyers of note. Two of the distinguished physicians of the early days were Dr. R. F. Boyd and Dr. Henry T. Noel, physicians and surgeons, now dead. Among the prominent physicians of the present day are:

Dr. F. A. Stewart, retired, a graduate of Fisk and Harvard Universities; Dr. J. H. Hale of Millie E. Hale Hospital; Dr. J. A. McMillan, superintendent of Hubbard Hospital; Dr. C. C. Harwell, Dr. C. O. Hadley, Dr. R. B. Jackson, Dr. C. V. Romans, ear, eye and nose specialist, and Dr. G. M. Kendrick.

There are also a number of competent and prosperous Negro dentists, among them Dr. E. B. Jefferson, Dr. J. A. Napier and Dr. I. L. Moore.

One of the most prominent Negro lawyers of the time immediately succeeding the Reconstruction days was S. A. McElwee. He served a term in the Tennessee Legislature. He was an orator, and was well thought of by his white contemporaries. He moved to Chicago where he attained distinction. He died a few years ago. Another of the old time lawyers was J. P. Rhine.

Among the active practitioners at the bar of the present day are J. C. Napier, W. H. Hodgens, W. S. Walker, a Howard graduate; C. L. Ennix, and Z. Alexander Looby, a West Indian.

Among the old-time business men, who live in the memory of men not yet old, were Elias W. Napier, who conducted a livery stable, the last location of which was on Broadway on a lot now occupied by the Hume-Fogg High School; Louis Winter, who owned a large produce store on South Fourth Avenue; and W. T. and Brown Hightower, who had a store on Fourth Avenue, south of Demonbreun Street, that bought and sold furniture and old iron.

Other business persons who are operating at the present time are: Mrs. Preston Taylor, widow of Preston Taylor, undertaker, minister of the Gospel, and owner of the Greenwood Cemetery; D. S. Scales, McKissack & McKissack; W. C. Sheffield, Ernest Jamerson, Thomas Perkins, Eugene Price, W. D. Rucker, J. T. Patton, undertakers; A. G. Price and M. G. Ferguson. Of course there are many others whose names cannot be mentioned in an article such as this.

MINISTERS OF THE GOSPEL

Nashville has always had a number of prominent Negro ministers of the Gospel. Among the famous old-timers, who have passed away were Nelson Merry, R. H. Boyd and B. T. Huffman, Baptists; and Napoleon Merry, Anderson Phillips, Jesse P. Price, and Hilliard Key, Methodists.

Following is a partial list of the present day ministers, many of whom rank high as pastors and in pulpit oratory: J. B. Ridley, J. L. Harding, G. B. Taylor, L. A. McIntyre, S. H. Simpson, T. H. Easley, S. S. Stubblefield, J. R. Stanton, S. C. Woodard, J. W. Watkins, J. T. Ridley, Wm. Kilcrease, W. M. Brooks, T. M. Grooms, A. M. Townsend, R. C. Barbour, W. S. Ellington, M. C. Durham, J. C. Fields, A. Bennett, H. W. Turner, D. A. Weakley, A. J. Jackoway, H. T. Hockett, Wm. Crawford, W. L. Murray, J. W. Evans, F. H. New, T. E. Parks, B. W. Murray, Wm. Pitt, Joseph Kell, Rev. Evans, H. Butler, Samuel Bryant, Willie Wilson, Zema Hill, J. B. Rurke, W. A. Anderson, S. L. Howard, D. L. Witherspoon, H. P. Gordon, A. D. Williams, W. B. Crenshaw, J. G. Hollis, E. S. Rose, A. L. DeMond, S. Myron Cochran, R. L. Martin, Spencer Jackson, Samuel Waddy, Zack Bostic, Rev. Mayfield, Rev. Golphin, Rev. Mills, J. J. Shute, Rev. Hughes, G. B. Drake, N. A. Bundy, J. W. Satterfield, B. T. Burch, H. Howard, J. C. Caldwell, S. L. Howard, and A. M. Townsend.

A NEGRO PATRIARCH

Any article on Nashville Negroes would not be complete without at least a brief sketch of J. C. Napier, who has long been the most distinguished member of his race in Nashville, and a useful citizen. He was born on the Cumberland River about seven miles out from Nashville on the Charlotte Road, June 9, 1845, the day after the death of General Andrew Jackson. Consequently the lives of these two men added together comprise the entire history of Tennessee from pioneer days to the present time. He has had and has now the friendship of many of the prominent white citizens of this State.

He was admitted to the bar in Nashville on motion of Gen. Thomas Smiley in May, 1872, and is one of the oldest members of the Nashville bar.

He was three times elected a member of the City Council of Nashville, and, as he puts it, he "is the only Negro living or dead, who ever presided over a session of the City Council of Nashville."

He was appointed Register of the United States Treasury by President Taft in 1911 and served throughout President Taft's term and eight months during President Woodrow Wilson's administration. He was the prime mover, associated with Dr. R. H. Boyd, President Taft and others in the organization of the One Cent Savings Bank in 1903. This bank opened for business January 16, 1904. The name has been changed to Citizens Savings Bank and Trust Co. Mr. Napier was elected cashier of this bank at its inception and has been cashier ever since.

He has been a delegate to a number of Republican National Conventions. He was a member of the Republican State Executive Committee for twenty years was secretary of the committee and on many occasions served as acting chairman. He was at one time a director in a savings bank conducted by white men.

He is a trustee of Fisk University; of Howard University of Washington, D. C.; Meharry Medical College of Nashville, and Anna T. Jeans Foundation, Philadelphia, Pa. The Jeans Foundation has $1,000,000 invested, the proceeds of which are donated to Negro rural schools of the South, amounting to from $50,000 to $75,000 annually. He served on this board as vice-chairman when President Taft, Andrew Carnegie, A. G. Ogden and James Foster Peabody were members. During President Taft's administration the board met in the White House. He is still vice-chairman of the board. A present-day member is Robert R. Morton, principal at Tuskegee Institute. Mr. Napier was also one of the trustees of Walden University.

As a member of the faculty of Meharry Medical College, he has been the lecturer on medical jurisprudence for twenty-six years.

MANY EXPERIENCES

J. C. Napier is now in his eighty-ninth year, in the full possession of his faculties and active for a man of his age. He is at his desk and transacting business every day. He saw slavery at its worst and at its best, and in the evening of his life cherishes no bitter memories and has no scores to settle. His own story as he tells it can hardly be improved upon. Let him speak for himself:

"As a little child my father and mother took me and my brother, Elias, to Cincinnati and bought a farm in what was then the city's suburbs. My father was not satisfied there and soon sold out and came back to Nashville, establishing a livery stable, which he conducted throughout his life, being succeeded by his son, Elias W. Napier. He and a number of other free men of color who lived in Nashville concluded to start a school for their children and induced a young minister to come here from Cincinnati and open a school. I was one of his pupils. One day the own watchman—for there was no police force then—came to the door and notified the teacher that his school broke the laws of Tennessee and Nashville, and that he must close it at once, send the children home and leave town within twenty-four hours.

"At the time I felt very resentful; but this feeling has passed away, for I know that after all Nashville and her people have been very kind to me. My father then sent my mother to take me and Elias to Ohio, where we matriculated in Wilberforce, a school established for colored children by the Methodist Episcopal Church, near Zenia, O. We went to Cincinnati on the steamboat Wenona for then there were no railroads going north from Nashville.

"My brother, Elias, returned to Nashville and entered the livery business with my father, and succeeded him in the business.

"My brother, Alonzo, after two and one-half years in West Point, returned to Nashville and became principal of one of the public schools here. While still a young man he was injured in a run-away accident and died eleven days later of tetanus.

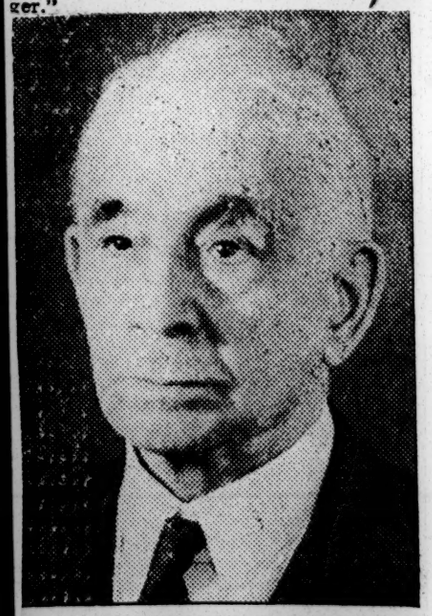
CHERISHED IDEALS

"I went to Oberlin College after leaving Wilberforce and remained there until my junior year, when I returned to Nashville. Prof. John Mercer Langston, organizer of the Law Department of Howard University, Washington, D. C., and a member of the Fifty-first and Fifty-second Congresses came to Nashville and induced my parents to send me to his law school, from which I graduated. My wife is Prof. Langston's

laughter. On my return to Nashville I was admitted to the bar, but was employed in the internal revenue service until President Cleveland was inaugurated and turned the Republicans out. I have since devoted myself to the practice of law and my business interests in Nashville except for the four years when I was Register of the United States Treasury.

"My father was William Carroll Napier, named for Gov. William Carroll. My middle name also is Carroll, for the Governor. My mother was Jane Elizabeth Watkins. You will pardon me for saying they were exceptional people. They had the respect and good will of both the white and colored people of this community. They always taught us children that we must be honest and truthful and law abiding; and I do not think we have departed from their teachings.

"I realize that the old ties which existed between the white and colored races have been largely severed; that the bonds of affection that prevailed until the older generations passed away no longer exist, and that the younger generations of both races realize that an altered condition is at hand; and while they may seem to be farther apart and to have less sympathy for one another, it is really the logical outgrowth of the effort of the young people of two races in one country and under one government to adjust their differences and to get together as citizens of that government and that country. We breathe the same air; we tread the same paths; we eat the same food; we drink the same water; we educate according to the same standards; we are ready always to make the supreme sacrifice for our flag and for our country. We worship the same God. These conditions existing, how can we long permit the small matter of race and color to prevent a united and everlasting friendship? And it is the cherished desire of my advanced years to do all within my power to lessen the friction between the white man and the colored man, and to bring them together in a helpful and hopeful spirit of cooperation. We cannot exist at cross purposes, and since we must live here together, let it be as Christian friends with a common purpose, and not as foes with sword and dagger."



J. C. NAPIER